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With Les Whitten

HOOVER'S COVERUP

WASHINGTON.

The late J. Edgar Hoover, in his zeal to protect his beloved FBI, engineered a coverup 12 years ago to keep the Warren Commission from learning about the ties between FBI agent James Hosty and assassin Lee Harvey Oswald.

The formidable Hoover, whose bulldog visage had become a national symbol of law and order, intervened personally when the Warren Commission began to zero in on Hosty.

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Now, 12 years later, Hosty has admitted destroying a threatening note, which Oswald delivered to the FBI office in Dallas a few days before shooting President Kennedy. The note threatened to blow up the FBI office and Dallas police headquarters if Hosty didn't stop bothering his wife.

The FBI should have notified the Secret Service that Oswald, a misfit who had threatened violence, was in the Dallas area. The Secret Service routinely would have checked his whereabouts during the presidential visit. This might have saved President Kennedy's life.

When the FBI learned that a suspect named Lee Harvey Oswald had been picked up, Hosty reminded his boss, Gordon Shanklin, that he had been handling the Oswald case. Shanklin telephoned the Dallas police and asked whether Hosty could participate in the interrogation.

Hosty later questioned Oswald at police headquarters. Oswald, who had been outwardly calm, suddenly became agitated. "I know you!" he shouted. "I know you! You're the one who accosted my wife twice!"

The incident passed, however, without any mention of the threatening letter. Hosty also confided to a friend on the Dallas police force, Lt. Jack Revill, that the FBI had a file on Oswald. Revill repeated the conversation to a superior who ordered him to put it in writing.

"Special Agent Hosty related to this officer . . ." wrote Revill, "that the Federal Bureau of Investigation was aware of the subject [Oswald] and that they had information that this subject was capable of committing the assassination of President Kennedy."

Hoover was furious when he learned of Hosty's loose talk. According to confidential notes taken at the time, the grizzled FBI chief complained that Hosty had "diarrhea of words." But the old man, nevertheless, sought to cover up the FBI's embarrassment.

On Dec. 23, 1963, the FBI gave the Warren Commission a summary of Oswald's notebook. The summary conveniently omitted the fact that Hosty's name, telephone and license tag had been in the notebook.

The commission found out about the omission and demanded an explanation. On Jan. 27, 1964, Hoover acknowledged that Hosty's name had been in the notebook.

The G-man also gave what purported to be a full account of the FBI's contacts with Oswald. The last contact, he reported, had been on Aug. 10, 1963. "We did not interview Oswald in Dallas, Texas, or in Irving, Texas, prior to the assassination of President Kennedy," Hoover added.

Interestingly, he used the word "our" to describe the last contact with the FBI. But on Feb. 6, in a sworn affidavit, Hoover changed the wording in a curious way. He swore that Oswald had no contact with FBI "agents" after Aug. 10, 1963.

It is now known, of course, that Oswald appeared at the FBI office in Dallas only a few days before the assassination. At that time, just as Hoover said, he did not speak with any FBI "agents." but he spoke with an FBI receptionist, who passed on his threatening note to the agents.

It is impossible to know whether the late FBI chief subtly switched the word "our" to "agents" in order to hide his knowledge of Oswald's violent threat.

But in a later letter to the Warren Commission, dated April 6, 1964, Hoover stated categorically: "I wish to emphasize that the facts available to the FBI concerning Lee Harvey Oswald prior to the assassination did not indicate in any way that he was or would be a threat to President Kennedy."

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The truth is, of course, that the FBI had received dramatic evidence less than a week before the assassination that Oswald was violence-prone. On April 24, the Dallas Morning News reported Hosty had told the Dallas police lieutenant, Jack Revill, that the FBI knew Oswald was "capable" of assassinating the President.

Hoover immediately sent word to the Warren Commission that the story was "false" and followed up three days later with a personal letter delivered by courier. "Special Agent Hosty unequivocally denies ever having made the statement as quoted in this article . . ." declared the FBI director.

"Special Agent Hosty points out that prior to the assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, he never had any information indicating potential violence on the part of Lee Harvey Oswald."